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THE OPERATIONS OF THE FIRST RANGER BATTALION
EL GUETTAR, 21-26 MARCH, 1943
(TUNISIAN CAMPAIGN)
(Personal Experience of a Company Commander)

Type of operation described: BATTALION IN THE ATTACK

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MAP

Tunisia - 1/200,000; El Ayacha Sheet

THE OPERATIONS OF THE FIRST RANGER BATTALION
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INTRODUCTION

This monograph covers the operations of the First Ranger Battalion in the Battle of El Guettar, Tunisia, 21-26 March, 1943.

This presentation has as its primary purpose the re-emphasis of the importance of secrecy and surprise in all military operations. This monograph will illustrate how the usage of these principles by American troops in the action at El Guettar laid the foundations for victory in the battle that followed.

These very closely allied principles of war have been instrumental in gaining military successes throughout history. The use of secrecy and surprise turned the tide of victory in many early military campaigns. Examples of such successes began before recorded history, but one of the earliest of which we have knowledge occurred in the year 217 B.C. The Roman Consul Flaminius held a defensive position at Arezzo, Italy, which he considered sufficient to halt the march of Hannibal, in position across the Appenines in Cisalpine Gaul. Hannibal, however, chose another route, crossed the mountains and marshes at points considered by Flaminius to be impassable, and marched past Flaminius to the high ground above Lake Trasimene. Flaminius was forced to give chase and lost his entire legion on the lake shore. (1)

(1) A-7, p. 48

Another historical example utilizing secrecy and surprise which, in this case, is similar to the action of the Ranger battalion at El Guettar, took place in the opening phase of the Battle of Quebec, September, 1759, between the French, under Montcalm, and the English, under Wolfe. The French forces, superior in numbers, position, and artillery, remained confidently in their positions on the Plains of Abraham after having beaten off two British ground attacks from the northeast. Wolfe, however, in a ship anchored below the Plains, discovered with his telescope a tiny goat-trail winding up the cliffs above the Saint Lawrence river. At 0200 hours, 13 September, twenty-four volunteers from his ship-borne army climbed the trail, surprised the small guard detachment, and secured the trail, permitting 3,600 following infantry to take battle positions. When dawn broke, the British were in battle array on the Plains of Abraham. Montcalm attacked the British and was routed. Thus, history records that a continent was eventually lost by France, due principally to the victory on the Plains of Abraham that had as its opening wedge the actions of twenty-four men on the hidden trail rising from the Saint Lawrence. (2)

The invasion of North Africa, 7-8 November, 1942, was another instance where the use of secrecy and surprise, this time on a strategic level, paid the usual high dividends. (See Map A) The First Ranger Battalion, comprised of six companies of sixty-three men and three officers each, spearheaded the initial assault as part of the "Center Task Force", capturing the coast defense (2) A-7, p. 49

installations located at Arzew, Algeria. After another brief but intense action at St. Cloud, active participation by the First Ranger Battalion in the invasion of North Africa ceased. (3)

The First Ranger Battalion engaged in a vigorous training program the next four months, including further combat in Tunisia, preceding the action to be discussed. A brief review of this period will show the type of battalion, and indicate the capabilities and limitations peculiar to a unit of this type - an appreciation vital to the main action to be discussed.

The battalion spent three months in intensive training in the vicinity of Arzew. All phases of combat operations were practiced, with special emphasis on night operations. The six companies of the battalion became thoroughly familiar with such operations over the distinctive North African terrain during this period. (4)

On 7 February, 1943, the battalion was flown from Oran, Algeria, to Youks-les-Bains, five miles north of Tebessa, Tunisia. Here it was attached to the American II Corps. (See Map B) The mission given the battalion by II Corps was the execution of a series of night raids on enemy outposts located in the vicinity of Sened Station and El Guettar. (5)

The first raid was made on the night of 11-12 February on an outpost guarding the approaches to Sened Station. Companies A, E, and F attacked at 0130 hours. At 0150 the three companies withdrew from the position. They had killed or captured 80 odd defenders, and

(3) A-5, p. 35, 37; (4) A-5, p. 36; A-8; (5) A-5, p. 38; A-8.

destroyed two 77 mm artillery pieces. The battalion commander stated later that the position had been completely surprised, and that no defensive fires had been laid down until the attackers were within 100 yards of the position. (6)

Axis armored columns, striking at ^{Faid} ~~Sbeitla~~ and Kasserine, during the following night and day, threatened to cut off the entire area as they began a rapid southward movement down the Kasserine-Feriana road. (See Map B) This caused a major withdrawal of all Allied forces from Gafsa-El Guettar sector.

The mission of the battalion was to screen and protect elements of II Corps during this withdrawal. The battalion was almost cut off during this action by the non-appearance of vehicles assigned from another unit. Fortunately, a few half-tracks of a passing tank destroyer unit provided a lift to Feriana. After holding several more defensive positions, the battalion made a forced march of twenty-four miles across country, reaching the Kasserine-Feriana road minutes ahead of the enemy columns. It then continued to its new defensive position at Dernia Pass. (See Map B) (7)

The battalion's defensive position on the Tebessa-Feriana road, held for three weeks, was vital to the defense of Tebessa, a major supply point. During this period, the major threat to the Allied defenses occurred at Kasserine, eight miles to the northeast. A major attack at Dernia Pass also appeared imminent. However, following the action at Kasserine, Axis columns were

(6) A-5, p. 38-40; Statement of Lieutenant Colonel William O. Darby, commander, First Ranger Battalion, at Gafsa, Tunisia, on 13 February, 1943; (7) Personal knowledge; A-11, p. 261; A-9; A-5, p. 41, 42.

observed to be evacuating Feriana, and moving to the southeast. All actions, but those of scattered patrols, halted on the entire front. The battalion was then moved into bivouac for a rest period. (8)

The battalion was attached on 14 March to the 1st Division and was moved as one of its reserve elements to a support position four miles north of Gafsa. (See Map C) Following the occupation of Gafsa by elements of the division, the Ranger battalion was ordered to advance and capture El Guettar on 18 March. The village itself was found unoccupied, but patrols probing beyond it to the east discovered strong enemy defensive positions astride the El Guettar-Sfax road. These were dug in along the forward slopes of Djebel* El Ank and Djebel Orbata so as to command the entire valley east and southeast of El Guettar. (See Map C) (9)

THE GENERAL SITUATION

The American II Corps was assigned a zone extending from Faïd in the north to Gafsa in the south. II Corps had a two-fold mission: To make a limited attack in the northern portion of its zone; to effect a penetration, followed by a drive to the sea, in the southern portion. (See Maps A, B) (10)

The defensive mission had a double purpose: To contain the enemy forces in the limited space of the eastern Tunisian coastal plain; to protect the supply installations and communications network which served the entire II Corps, and were later to become supply bases for the

(8) Personal knowledge; A-8; A-5, p. 43; A-10, p. 22;
*Djebel - Arabic, meaning mountain; (9) Personal knowledge;
A-8; A-5, p. 44, 45; A-11, p. 276; (10) Personal knowledge;
A-2, p. 5.

British Eighth Army.

If successful, the offensive mission would place Allied units across the rear of the enemy forces which were trying so desperately at this time to stem the advance of the British Eighth Army at the Mareth Line. If the attack made only limited gains, the pressure alone would be of invaluable aid to the Eighth Army by siphoning off Axis reserve elements.

The 1st Division, to which the First Ranger Battalion was attached, was to make a two-pronged attack to the east along the El Guettar-Sfax and El Guettar-Gabes roads. (See Maps B, C) The First Ranger Battalion mission in support of this attack also was two-fold: First, to overcome the strong enemy position blocking the El Guettar-Sfax road; second, to seize the enemy-held heights which overlooked both the El Guettar-Sfax and El Guettar-Gabes roads. The battalion attack would precede the main attacks of the 1st Division. (11)

The terrain in the division zone consisted of bleak, ragged ridges and arid valleys supporting no vegetation other than scrubby desert brush. Cover and concealment in the area was either very effective, in the knife-like, jagged ridges, boulder-strewn hills and precipitous wadis*, or non-existent in the spaces between them. The mountain masses enclosing El Guettar and its road junction on three sides presented formidable obstacles to any forward movement. South of El Guettar was a shallow salt lake, impassable to vehicles.

The sharp ridges favored the defender at every turn.

(11) Personal knowledge; A-6, p. 114; *Wadi - Arabic, meaning gully or arroyo.

Djebel Orbata rose sharply from the plain east of Gafsa to a height of 1100 feet and roughly paralleled the course of the road from Gafsa through El Guettar to a point 17 miles to the east on the El Guettar-Sfax road. Djebel El Ank rose, cliff-like, from the El Guettar-Sfax road at its junction with Djebel Orbata, to a height of 850 feet. It fell away to the south and southeast where the El Guettar-Gabes road climbed over several of its feeder ranges. Djebel Berda was the dominating terrain in the area, Though only 800 feet in height, observation of the entire El Guettar-Gafsa area was possible from its peak. This ridge system constituted one of the last enemy-defended natural obstacles to the junction of the British Eighth Army and the American II Corps. (12)

The enemy had carefully planned his defense so as to exploit the terrain characteristics to the fullest. Observation posts had been established on the commanding peaks. The dug-in defensive positions complemented each favorable aspect of the terrain. (13)

Enemy defensive forces in the area included elements of the Italian Centaurian Division and the German 10th Panzer Division. About 12 miles to the east were elements of the 15th Panzer and 90th Light Divisions, plus other assorted units which had been gathered up in the retreat before the advancing British Eighth Army. (14)

THE BATTALION SITUATION

Dawn, 19 March, 1943, found the First Ranger Battalion debouching from the lower slopes of Djebel Orbata, passing

(12) Personal knowledge; A-4, p. 72; A-9, p. 645; A-11, p. 273; (13) Personal knowledge; (14) A-2, p. 5; A-4, p. 69.

through El Guettar and going into its bivouac area in the sunken, mud-walled oasis on the southern outskirts of the village. Enemy artillery, with its excellent observation, signalled its knowledge of this action by pounding intermittent salvos into the area. (See Map C) (15)

Action was taken immediately by the battalion commander to utilize the terrain to the fullest. Company B took possession of "The Pimple", a small hill at the junction of the roads one mile east of El Guettar. The area was outposted and mines were laid in the major approaches. Preparations were immediately begun for intensive night patrolling to determine the locations and strength of the enemy to the east. (16)

On the night of 20-21 March, two officer-led patrols searched Djebel Orbata for enemy dispositions and for possible approaches into the enemy positions. One patrol, after scouting the lower levels, returned at dawn. The other patrol, having reached the narrow plateau along the top of Djebel Orbata, remained in observation from its position above and behind the enemy defensive installations until 1700 hours, 21 March, when it returned to El Guettar with a prisoner. (17)

The battalion commander at this time was at the 1st Infantry Division command post. He had left instructions that the leader of the second patrol call him there if the latter should return during his absence. The information given the battalion commander by this officer confirmed the battalion commander's beliefs with reference to the enemy strength, positions, and a possible route to their

(15) Personal knowledge; A-11, p. 276; (16) Personal knowledge; (17) Personal knowledge; A-8.

rear. On the basis of this information, the decision was made to attack the positions at Djebel Orbata and Djebel El Ank from the rear at dawn the following morning, 22 March. (18)

The plan of attack by the 1st Division called for a simultaneous triple-thrust east and southeast from El Guettar. (See Map C) The 26th Combat Team, with the First Ranger Battalion attached, was to clear the enemy from the pass at Djebel El Ank and to be prepared to continue the attack. The 18th Combat Team was to drive down the Gabes road to its objective at the next major road junction northeast of Djebel Berda. The 16th Combat Team was given the mission of clearing the enemy from the forward slopes of Djebel El Ank between the roads and to prepare to continue the attack on order. (19)

The 1st Division plan had, as threats to its success, the enemy observation possible from commanding ground at Djebel Berda, and the possibility of a strong counter-attack from the pass at Djebel El Ank. Although the enemy at Djebel El Ank had done everything possible to make the pass impregnable, he regarded the high peaks on both sides of the pass only as excellent observation posts. (20)

THE BATTALION PLAN OF ATTACK

The approximate locations of enemy positions guarding the pass at Djebel El Ank had been plotted by patrols and were made known when the battalion order for the attack was issued. (See Maps C, D) It had been estimated that there was one reinforced infantry battalion in the defense

(18) Personal knowledge; (19) Personal knowledge; A-5, p. 44; (20) A-6, p. 113, 114, 119.

in the vicinity of the pass with machine guns and 77 mm guns in excellent positions.

The 1st and 3rd Battalions, 26th Infantry, were to attack the outer defenses of the pass at H 1 hours (0600) with the continuing mission of securing Bou Hamran*. The 2nd Battalion and remaining units of the 26th Combat Team were to assist in the general mission of securing the division's left front flank.

The First Ranger Battalion's plan of attack was to cross the line of departure at H-Hour (0500) with Companies A, B, D, E, and F abreast, and move straight down the slopes of Djebel Orbata into the pass with the mission of destroying the enemy defenses located there. The line of departure, to the enemy's right rear, was to be reached by moving the battalion in a single file over the difficult terrain of Djebel Orbata during the hours of darkness preceding the attack. (21)

Company D, 1st Engineer Battalion, attached, was to provide a heavy covering fire for the attack with its 81 mm mortars. Company C, Ranger Battalion, was to be held in reserve to the rear of the line of departure, and was to furnish overhead fire until masked by the advancing troops.

The battalion's 536 radios were to be used for communication during the attack. The signal for the attack to jump off would be a bugle call from the battalion commander's observation post near the line of departure. The battalion commander planned to fight his battalion during the attack from the same vantage point. (22)

*Statement of Captain A. R. Levasseur (then platoon leader in Company A, 26th Infantry) on 12 November, 1947; (21) Personal knowledge; A-8; (22) Personal knowledge; A-8.

THE ATTACK ON THE PASS

The six companies of the First Ranger Battalion, with Company D, 1st Engineer Battalion attached, moved out of El Guettar at 2300 hours, 21 March. The route taken was extremely difficult. In many cases toggle-ropes, which were an item of special individual equipment in the battalion, were necessary to effect passage of men and equipment over cliffs and ravines. Due to these difficulties, together with the heavy loads the men were carrying, Company D, 1st Engineer Battalion, with its 81 mm mortars, was unable to continue the pace, and fell to the rear. The battalion continued its forward movement, however, and moved into attack position at 0430 hours, 22 March. The six mile march across Djebel Orbata to the line of departure had taken four and a half hours. (See Map D) (23)

The five companies rapidly moved into an extended skirmish line. They were to the rear of the defensive positions in the pass. A bugle call at 0500 hours launched the attack. Under a heavy covering fire from the heights along the line of departure, the assault groups swept down the slopes.

Surprise was complete! The enemy was caught totally off-guard. Many of his gun positions had not yet been manned and the few that were prepared were sited to fire down the road toward El Guettar. The secrecy and stealth used in the movement to the line of departure paid dividends with each captured prisoner, most of whom were captured as they dazedly ran toward their defenses. (24)

By 0520 hours, more than 200 prisoners had been taken.

(23) A-8; A-3, p. 4; (24) Personal knowledge; A-5, p. 45; A-6, p. 143-150.

The assault groups continued their rapid fire and movement, and a few white surrender flags were noted flying from other gun positions. These areas were rapidly cleared and others, inside the pass and still resisting, were attacked with rifles, grenades, and bayonets. The action thus deteriorated into a series of scattered assaults which continued inside the pass until about 0650 hours. (25)

The situation was cleared up at this time by the attack of the 1st and 3rd battalions of the 26th Infantry on the outer defenses of the pass. The 1st battalion, 26th Infantry, originally ordered to attack along the lower slopes of Djebel Orbata at 0600 hours, had been delayed when the S-2 and S-3 of the battalion had been pinned down while on reconnaissance, by enemy fire from the vicinity of the pass*. (26)

The combined, three-pronged assault of the three battalions cleared the area north of the road by 0830 hours. (See Map D) The only organized resistance south of the road now consisted of several deeply dug-in machine gun positions. At 0900 hours, Company D, 1st Engineer Battalion, arrived on the line of departure and immediately set up its mortars. Supported by this heavy and accurate covering fire, Company C of the Ranger Battalion attacked the machine gun positions with rifle and bayonet, forcing their surrender. Following this action, all six companies fanned out over the slopes of Djebel Orbata and Djebel El Ank, ferreting out other isolated positions. The battalion commander notified the 26th Infantry regimental commander at 1220 hours that the inner positions of the pass

(25) Personal knowledge; A-5, p. 45, 119; *Statement of Captain A. R. Levasseur (then platoon leader in Company A, 26th Infantry) on 12 November, 1947; (26) Personal knowledge.

had been cleared. (27)

At 1230 hours, two companies of the battalion were ordered by the battalion commander to attack and secure Bou Hamran, three miles northeast of the pass. (See Map D) Units of the 26th Combat Team composed of infantry, artillery, engineers, and armor, began moving northeast through the pass at 1250 hours. The four remaining companies of the Ranger Battalion, outposting the pass at this time, began assembling the 1400 prisoners captured earlier, and made preparations to march them toward El Guettar. (28)

The road through the pass became severely congested at this point. It proved to be an ideal target for the attack placed on it at this time by twelve JU 88s which suddenly appeared on the scene. They dove in over Djebel Orbata and bombed and strafed the massed vehicles and men from about 200 feet. The casualties, however, proved to be surprisingly light, consisting of three men killed, five wounded, and two 105 howitzers and nine trucks and half-tracks destroyed. The principal difficulty lay in recapturing the 1400 prisoners, who had unanimously bolted for the rocks at the first appearance of the enemy planes. (29)

The Ranger Battalion was ordered by the 1st Division to return to El Guettar at 1430 hours to reconstitute the division reserve, and was thereby relieved of the mission of capturing Bou Hamran. The battalion closed into its bivouac area at El Guettar at 1830 hours. After the evening meal was completed, reorganization and resupply of the

(27) A-8; A-6, p. 152, 153; A-5, p. 45, 119; (28) Personal knowledge; (29) Personal knowledge; A-8; A-6, p. 165.

battalion began, as a warning order had been received for possible action on the following day, 23 March. (30)

THE DEFENSE OF EL GUETTAR

At 0500 hours, 23 March, the German 10th Panzer Division attacked on the front held by the 1st and 3rd Battalions, 18th Infantry. (See Maps C, E) The attack was made with approximately sixty tanks, two infantry battalions, and two artillery battalions. It roughly paralleled the Gafsa-Sabes road. The Ranger Battalion was ordered by 1st Division at 0600 hours to take a defensive position on the left flank of the 3rd Battalion, 18th Infantry. The German attack continued, unabated in its ferocity, throughout the day. The highest tide of the attack occurred shortly after noon when artillery and tank destroyer units of the division held off several tank-infantry assaults with direct fire. During this period, JU 88s intermittently bombed and strafed the defense line. The defense line held, however, At 1715 hours, the German armor that was capable of movement was observed moving off toward the east. With the exception of patrol clashes forward of the defense area, and the actions of German tank recovery vehicles, no further action took place at this position through the night of 23-24 March. (31)

THE ATTACK ON DJEBEL BERDA

At 1100 hours, 24 March, the battalion was ordered by 1st Division to seize the high ground in the vicinity of Djebel Berda. (See Maps C, F) This previously discussed prominent point, at this time, was affording excellent observation for the (30) Personal knowledge; A-5, p. 46; (31) Personal knowledge; A-5, p. 46, 119.

enemy artillery. All movement in the El Guettar area could be seen. This seizure was accomplished, and Djebel Berda secured at 1730 hours, following an arduous climb up the slopes and a brief action at the top. At 2200 hours, all the companies on Djebel Berda, with the exception of Company D, were ordered to descend the steep slopes to reinforce the 2nd Battalion, 18th Infantry, which at that time was under attack at the base of Djebel Berda. (32)

Company D was ordered to hold the top of Djebel Berda until further orders. (See Map F) The company commander disposed his company in accordance with these instructions. Automatic weapons were sighted to fire down the slopes. The men were unable to dig in due to the rocky formation of the hill, but reeked up individual firing positions in an all-around defense. (33)

At 0345 hours, 25 March, the commander of Company D alerted his company for what seemed to be an attack forming on the eastern slopes of Djebel Berda. He had heard sounds coming from below his company command post that indicated preparations were under way for such an attack. Instead of an attack, however, the clinking machine gun belts heralded the approach of Company E, 18th Infantry. The E Company commander was leading his company, but abruptly halted when challenged by the commander of Company D. Due to the E Company commander's ignorance of the password for the day, he nearly became a casualty at this point, but was saved by his rapid explanations. (34)

It developed that Company E had been ordered to withdraw from the action at the northern base of Djebel Berda and to

(32) Personal knowledge; A-5, p. 46; A-5, p. 119; A-8;

(33) Personal knowledge; A-8; A-5, p. 46; (34) Personal knowledge; A-8.

take positions along the crest. (See Maps C, F) The instructions had been somewhat incomplete, in that the company commander of Company E had not been told that the heights had previously been occupied by friendly troops. After the necessarily nervous introductions were accomplished, the E Company commander moved his company onto the already crowded crest, where the men rested, awaiting orders. (35)

THE WITHDRAWAL FROM DJEBEL BERDA

Heavy surprise concentrations of mortar and artillery time fire burst on the top of Djebel Berda at 0630 hours, followed five minutes later by intense heavy machine gun fire from points down the northeastern slopes of the ridge. (See Map F) German infantry in company strength attacked up the slopes at 0640 hours, firing machine-pistols. The restricted area of the hill, the mixed personnel of the two companies, and the lack of shelter of many of the men combined to cause serious confusion at the outset of this attack. Had it not been for the automatic weapons firing from behind rock-laid defenses and taking the attacking infantry under heavy fire, it was possible the position may have been promptly overrun. In the ensuing action, however, Company D delayed successively on the three knolls of Djebel Berda, covering Company E as it withdrew down the northwest slopes. The German infantry began an envelopment along the slopes at this point, as the mortar and time fire continued to fall on the hill. The Ranger Battalion commander ordered Company D to withdraw from the third delaying position at 0725 hours. The withdrawal was successfully accomplished, the company moving rapidly down near-vertical cliffs and talus slides to a wadi at the southwestern base of Djebel Berda. The company (35) Personal knowledge; A-8.

marched three miles northwest through this wadi and rejoined the battalion at about 0930 hours. (36)

RELIEF OF THE FIRST RANGER BATTALION

The 1st and 2nd Battalions, 18th Infantry, were ordered to withdraw from the vicinity of Djebel Berda and return to El Guettar on the night of 25-26 March. The Ranger Battalion acted as security for this disengagement, after which defensive positions were taken along the northwestern foot of the Djebel Berda hill mass. The battalion was relieved at this latter position at 0545 hours, 26 March, by the 2nd Battalion, 39th Infantry, 9th Division*, and immediately moved out to El Guettar. This relief marked the end of the Ranger Battalion's participation in the action. The battalion was held in its bivouac area at El Guettar, however, for further use if necessary. The closing of the final chapters of the battle of El Guettar occurred when Djebel Berda was recaptured at 1200 hours, 7 April, by elements of the 9th Division. Advance units of the British 10th Corps, Eighth Army, were contacted on the Gafsa-Gabes road at 1705 hours that afternoon. (37)

ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

In studying this series of operations, it becomes evident that the astute and unexpected use of secrecy and surprise, at a time when all the other factors are equal, may very decisively swing the balance of victory. The calculated risks taken in attacking the Djebel El Ank positions with the 390 men of the First Ranger Battalion paid huge dividends. The early collapse of the positions at this point

(36) Personal knowledge; A-8; A-5, p. 46; *Statement of Major W. E. Walters (then commander, Company H, 39th Infantry) on 18 November, 1947; (37) Personal knowledge; A-1, p. 2; A-4, p. 72; A-6, p. 46; A-9, p. 646, 647.

was directly responsible for the rapid advance and exploitation that followed. Continuing, it is reasonable to believe that the same ground in our possession, coupled with the type and armament of units fighting over it, was instrumental in bringing about the defeat of the German 10th Panzer Division when it attacked on 23 March, 1943.

The unexpected surprise attack of the Djebel El Ank position was made possible by the fact that the Ranger Battalion was capable of the passage of obstacles such as the cliffs and gullies of Djebel Orbata with its normal fighting equipment. In an operation of this type, the battalion's light armament was an advantage. In the action at Djebel Berda, however, it proved to be a disadvantage as D Company lacked the proper weapons to hold the hill.

While the Ranger Battalion felt secure in assaulting a beach or operating in the mountains with its organization and equipment, the basic weaknesses inherent in the organization for continued defensive action became clear in the defense action of 23 March against the attack of the 10th Panzer Division. The original concept of the use of the battalion was that it was to be used in special assault missions. These included raids and reconnaissance in force of enemy beaches, and landings on small isolated beaches to destroy defensive installations. When, as at El Guettar, it became necessary to commit the battalion in a defensive role, the basic shortages of men and of the necessary defensive weapons and supplies were very keenly felt.

The battalion was so short of organic transportation that, even in combat areas, all movement was made by marching or with vehicles borrowed from another unit. This latter

point was very forcibly demonstrated during the withdrawal from Gafsa on 13-14 February, 1943. By sheer luck, half-tracks of the 601st Tank Destroyer Battalion were encountered by the rear guard. These vehicles provided a lift to Feriana. Trucks, which had been assigned from another unit, had failed to appear.

Throughout the actions at El Guettar, the very thorough training of the battalion was noticeable. The successful movement at night over Djebel Orbata to attack the pass positions had, as its training foundation, many similar exercises practiced at Arzew. The men of the battalion were proficient in the use of the battalion weapons. The high standards of physical condition, the mountain climbing techniques, and the combat methods of the battalion all owed their existence to the thoroughness of prior training.

The men themselves possessed admirable characteristics which helped the unit over many difficulties. All were volunteers and the men in each of the sixty-three man companies knew each other thoroughly. The resiliency of their morale and their high esprit de corps dated back to their commando training and to the actions at Dieppe, Arzew, Sened Station, and Derna Pass. The trust and respect the men felt for each other and their officers was based on combat experience and mutual sharing of the rigors of war.

The personal leadership of Lieutenant Colonel (later Brigadier General) William O. Darby, the battalion commander, ranked equally important with the combat comradeship felt throughout the battalion. He was one of the few men gifted with nearly all of the qualities and attributes of the successful combat commander. He had nurtured the battalion

from inception as its first commander. It suffices to say that the training was so rigorous that many of the men relaxed somewhat under combat conditions.

The battle of El Guettar began and ended with struggles for the commanding ground. With the seizure of the pass at Djebel El Ank, the left flank of the 1st Division was secured. By the same token, however, the fact that Djebel Berda was captured late in the action, and was then promptly lost, resulted in accurate observed artillery fire continuing to fall in the El Guettar area throughout the action. When Djebel Berda was recaptured on 7 April, the German positions were promptly abandoned, and the British Eighth Army was contacted the same afternoon. This action effectively blocked the corridor to the south. The pressure was increased as the action continued northward toward Bizerte and Cape Bon. On 12 May, 1943, general unconditional surrender of 248,000 Axis troops followed the capture of Von Arnim, the army commander.

By General Order Number 56, War Department, dated 12 July, 1944, the First Ranger Battalion was cited for its outstanding performance of duty in action at El Guettar, and under the provisions of Section IV, Circular Number 333, awarded the Distinguished Unit Badge.

LESSONS

In the strictest definition of the phrase, there were really no new lessons learned during the operations of the First Ranger Battalion at El Guettar. However, there were some new slants cast on some of the old established principles, and in the final analysis the fact becomes evident

that the major lessons learned were a pointed re-emphasis of these established principles. Several of the most important of these lessons are:

1. Secrecy and surprise help to win battles. The enemy position at Djebel El Ank, while very strong to the front, was proven to be relatively weak when it was taken from the rear and flank by determined attack.

2. Observation and seizure of the dominant terrain is a vital necessity. This is especially true in open terrain, such as was found in the El Guettar area.

3. Commanders of all units must possess complete and intimate knowledge of the terrain in their sectors in the attack as at Djebel El Ank and especially so in the defense, as the attack of the 10th Panzer Division, for an example.

4. Specialized training prior to combat in mountain and hill warfare is an absolute necessity. The troops learned at El Guettar from experience to avoid the natural corridors of approach, which were invariably mined and heavily defended, and instead, to work along the ridges and high terrain features. In this way, the enemy was forced to abandon strongly defended positions at the heads of the corridors and natural approaches.

5. Night patrolling operations must be stressed in the battle training of the individual soldier. ~~The resulting effect will be a more thorough knowledge of the situation confronting commanders.~~ This in turn will more clearly define the possible courses of action. The two officer-led patrols that scouted the route of advance and the enemy defenses at Djebel El Ank are cases in point.

6. Re-emphasis must be placed on the rapid and effective organization and consolidation of captured ground.

An example of poor organization of captured ground occurred at Djebel Berda. Had the hill been properly organized, consolidated, and prepared for defense, the German attacks could have been beaten off. Men must never be allowed to judge themselves to be too tired to dig in, place their weapons, and prepare for attack after having captured or occupied enemy ground.

7. Special units should be used in the roles for which they are designed. The characteristics of the First Ranger Battalion enabled it to successfully accomplish the missions for which it was originally intended. The landings on difficult beaches and operations in the mountains of North Africa, Sicily, and Italy proved the fact. In any future operations, should units of similar types be committed in a defensive situation, immediate action should be taken to properly reinforce and equip the units to insure their chances of efficiently acquitting themselves in combat of this type.

8. It is the considered opinion of this observer that the need for special light assault units will continue in a war of the predictable future. The capabilities of such organizations are well known. Exception is taken to the growing trend of thought that units of this type are now unnecessary, inasmuch as infantry divisional units can successfully accomplish missions requiring the rapid seizure of extremely difficult terrain. Immediately there comes to mind the most important task that may be assigned to an infantry unit in an amphibious assault: that of neutralizing major coastal defenses in advance of the main landings. In consideration of this fact and of the present size, organization and equipment of infantry rifle companies, it is felt that special units would be so much less restricted in movement that their chances would be proportionately better for successful completion of such missions.